

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 41

Issue 2 *Writing 1914-1918: National Responses
to the Great War*

Article 18

6-15-2017

Leslie Barnes. Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2014.

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Recommended Citation

Gerring, Michele L. (2017) "Leslie Barnes. Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2014.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 41: Iss. 2, Article 18.
<https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1948>

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Abstract

Review of Leslie Barnes. *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 2014.

Keywords

vietnam, colonialism, French literature

Leslie Barnes. *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2014. viii + 301 pp.

In this work, Leslie Barnes addresses an understudied issue: the way in which French contact with Vietnam, both during and after the colonial period, affected trends in twentieth-century metropolitan French literature. Barnes undertakes this examination through close analyses of works by André Malraux, Marguerite Duras, and Linda Lê, with the goal of distilling the nature of the influence of these authors' experiences in Vietnam on their literary production. She argues that the existential novel, the post-war experimental novel, and the contemporary immigrant novel set in France have been significantly influenced by some French authors' familiarity with Vietnam, and that the innovative approaches found in novels by Malraux, Duras, and Lê are largely by-products of their experiences there.

Part One examines the way in which Malraux's novels, written in Indochina between 1923 and 1926, exemplify the trends visible in both colonial exoticism and early existentialism. According to Barnes, to the extent that Malraux's works are existentialist, his characters confront the absurdities of their existences and choose to take action in ways that give their lives meaning in foreign spaces. The way in which they approach their existential crises mirrors the way in which characters in other novels of colonial exoticism confront obstacles to *la mission civilisatrice* 'the civilizing mission.' Malraux's 1926 *La Tentation de l'Occident* (*The Temptation of the West*) represents his response to the post-World War I intellectual crisis in France, that of a *mise-en-question* 'questioning' of the value of Western rationalism. Malraux saw this crisis in the West as a decline parallel to the way in which colonial subjects were exploited in Indochina and to the way in which French people there were prone to moral degradation. Subsequently, Part Two, "The Politics and Poetics of Marguerite Duras' *Métissage*," calls attention to the concept of *métissage* 'mixed identity' in Duras's novels and to the effects of Duras's experiences in Indochina on her fiction. Barnes argues that Duras's culturally and linguistically mixed childhood was key to her autobiographical writing and analyzes three of Duras's novels set in Indochina: *L'Amant* (*The Lover*, 1984), *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (*The North China Lover*, 1991), and *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* (*Sea Wall*, 1950). She holds that the variations in style among these works are representative of Duras's confrontation with the idea of her own *métissage* as a person of European descent living in colonial Indochina. Just as this concept evokes the notions of non-resolution and indeterminacy, so does the nature of Duras's "serial autobiography" (113), consisting of the three aforementioned novels, and of the 1977 play, *L'Eden Cinéma* (*Eden Cinema*) an adaptation of *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*. Duras, who was born in Vietnam in 1914, identified more closely with the Vietnamese than with other members of French colonial

society. For Barnes, some of the techniques used by Duras that evoke the idea of *métissage* are shifts in perspective, voices, and temporalities. In *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique*, Duras uses stark realism in order to expose the injustices of French colonialism. From Barnes's perspective, *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* examine the ideas of the self and narrative and the way in which they are affected by linguistic disorientation, anachronistic juxtaposition, and fragmentation. Unlike Philippe Lejeune, the author of the 1975 work *Le Pacte autobiographique* (*The Autobiographical Pact*), which analyzes Duras's *Un Barrage contre le Pacifique* as well as other autobiographies by Gide, Sartre, and Rousseau, Barnes does not see the goal of Duras's autobiographical writing as self-representation.

Part Three examines the link between the themes of sacrifice and literary creation in *Vinh L.*, the last novella of Lê's 1993 work *Les Evangiles du crime* (*The Gospels of the Crime*), and the theme of haunting in her trilogy consisting of *Les Trois parques* (*The Three Fates*, 1997), *Voix: Une crise* ('Voice[s]: a Crisis,' 1998), and *Lettre morte* ('Dead Letter,' 1999). The novels of this trilogy all feature ghosts and grotesque imagery. Although she was born in post-colonial Vietnam in 1963, Lê's works are set in France, with only vague references to Vietnam. Barnes characterizes Lê's novels and literary essays as "diasporic trauma narratives" (3), representative of her experience of postcolonial exile, and also of her concern with the connections between language, representation, and form. Barnes examines Lê's work under the lenses of trauma theory, deconstruction, and Catherine Malabou's concept of "plasticity." At face value, Barnes sees Lê's trilogy as a way of coming to terms with her own despair after her father's death, and with forces that had led her to sacrifice her Vietnamese culture in order to assimilate into French society. However, Lê's trilogy is also a means of evoking the universality intrinsic to experiences of trauma and displacement.

Grosso modo, Barnes's monograph is a serious, well-researched exploration of a topic that deserves further analysis. This work is admirable for its efforts to see Malraux's, Duras's, and Lê's works through lenses that are impartial to the biases of French and Francophone literatures, respectively. Her book is also a valuable contribution to the conversation about the division made between French and Francophone literatures, as she shows that these distinctions are less clear-cut than they appear. Instead of affirming the idea of a world literature in French that defies the dichotomy of French vs. Francophone literatures, Barnes encourages scholars to focus more on the universality of experiences of post-colonial exile and marginality and to avoid the tendency to assign representations of these experiences to categories that carry nationalist or "global/exotic" connotations. Lastly, Barnes's exhortation to other scholars to examine the way in which French contact with colonial societies in other parts of the world shaped the development of metropolitan literature has the potential to yield fascinating scholarship, although

this call could have been strengthened by the inclusion of a few examples of this phenomenon. Additionally, readers would benefit from a more detailed explanation of the historical context of Lê's works.

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